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Egyptians have ousted their authoritarian President. But what kind of government will replace him—and what will it mean for the U.S.?

By Patricia Smith

Eighteen days of protests in the streets of Cairo and across Egypt achieved what many had thought impossible: They forced the resignation of Hosni Mubarak, the authoritarian President who had ruled the nation for 30 years.

"We can breathe fresh air, we can feel our freedom," says Gamal Heshamt, a former independent member of the Egyptian Parliament.

"After 30 years of absence from the world, Egypt is back."



There's no doubt that Mubarak's ouster is hugely significant—a changing of the guard in the most-populous country in the Middle East and a key U.S. ally. The question is, what comes next?

The answer to that question has broad implications for the entire region, for U.S. policy in the Middle East, and for Israel and the future of the stalled peace process.

The upheaval in Egypt was sparked by the example of Tunisia, where protests ousted that nation's longtime dictator in January. Since Mubarak was forced to step down on Feb. 11, protests have erupted across the region—including in Bahrain, Algeria, Iran, Libya, and Yemen—all ruled by authoritarian regimes or outright dictators (*see map*).

Mubarak handed power to the Egyptian military when he resigned. As of mid-February, it was unclear whether the military would act to carry out the democratic reforms protesters sought or leave power in the hands of the generals.

"I worry that senior generals may want . . . a Mubarak-style government without Mubarak," says *Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof. "In essence, the regime may have decided that Mubarak had become a liability and thrown him overboard—without any intention of instituting the kind of broad, meaningful democracy that the public wants."

Another Iran?

Others—particularly Israel, which has had a peace treaty with Egypt for three decades, and Saudi Arabia, another key U.S. ally—worry about radical Islamists seizing power and hijacking the revolution. That's what happened with the Iranian Revolution in 1979, in which hardline Islamic clerics took over and turned the country into an anti-Western, Islamic theocracy.

That helps to explain why President Obama walked a careful line during the protests in Egypt, trying not to completely abandon a U.S. ally, while encouraging Mubarak to listen to the protesters' demands and eventually step aside.

"What happened in Iran has made the U.S. really gun-shy about popular change in the region, but Egypt is in a very different place than Iran was 30 years ago," says Thomas Carothers of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington.

Times columnist Roger Cohen believes that the situation in Egypt is more likely to turn into something like the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, which sparked the collapse of Communism and the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe, and enabled a number of stable democracies to emerge.

"Egypt strikes me as a good bet for a viable democracy for several reasons," Cohen writes. "Unlike Iraq, it is a unified nation-state—the world's oldest—with no big ethnic fault lines. Transformation is being born from the bottom up, unlike in Iraq, where it was imposed. There is a large educated and professional class, proud of Egypt's heritage . . . determined to bring the nation into the modern world."

Still, true democracy doesn't have much of a track record in the Middle East. Aside from Israel and Turkey (a Muslim country which experts cite as an example for Egypt), the closest thing to a democracy in the Middle East is Iraq, which remains a work in progress eight years after the U.S. and its allies toppled dictator Saddam Hussein.

Many observers agree that whatever kind of Egyptian government emerges, it's likely to be less cozy with the U.S.

With a population of 80 million and a civilization that dates back 5,000 years to the ancient pharaohs, Egypt has long been considered one of the most important countries in the Middle East.

In 1979, Egypt became the first Arab nation to make peace with Israel. It has since been one of America's strongest allies in a volatile region and one of the largest recipients of U.S. aid, about \$1.5 billion a year. And since the 9/11 attacks, Egypt has

also been a key partner in the fight against terrorism.

But the country suffers from massive problems. Almost a third of Egyptians are illiterate. Corruption is rampant, and the police are feared. While the economy—which remains largely state-run—has grown significantly in the last decade, little new wealth has trickled down, and the gap between the country's elite and its poor has grown ever wider.

Facebook Effect

Aggravating the situation is the fact that more than half of Egypt's population is under 25. Economic stagnation, combined with this "youth bulge," has led to enormous frustration: University graduates cannot find jobs, and many young people cannot afford to get married or move out of their parents' homes.

Egypt's youth led the revolt in the streets and used social media like Facebook and Twitter to organize and get the word out to the world about their demands.

Those young organizers now hope young people across the Middle East will be inspired by their example.

"What Egypt did will be the force that will push the world," says Walid Rachid, 27, a member of one of the youth movements that helped organize the uprising. "If a small group of people in every Arab country went out and persevered as we did, then that would be the end of all the regimes."

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